

10

Nothing Is Everything!

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10.1 Dream utopia

Grand Prince Anpyeong (or Anpyeong Daegun) (1418–1453) had a dream, which when he awoke to a day predicted to be disputatious, left him moved and tranquil.¹ It was 1447 in Korea and factional power struggles were reaching passionate heights in the court of King Sejong (1397–1450). Anpyeong was the scholar prince, the third son of Sejong the Great, well versed in the Six Classics, a bibliophile who owned ten thousand books, a gifted musician, and master of the ‘Three Perfections’—of poetry, calligraphy, and painting.

Anpyeong dreamed that he was climbing up a steep slope for what seemed like a long time. Suddenly, the mountain trail dropped into a deep crevice. He climbed down and followed a wooded path as if guided by some power outside himself. Then he found himself stepping into a clearing and became conscious of a strange sensation, which drew wonderfully clear and close. In an instant, without transition, he found himself in an incredible orchard bursting with peach blossom. As he wandered through the blossom, the distress of discord in his heart was replaced by a new certainty in a cosmic order, and he was in perfect harmony with the world. New depths of truth had been illuminated, revealing to him that all the forces of nature, including human nature, were interconnected. When he understood that he was in Utopia, the dream attained the peak of its significance.²

So vivid was the dream that when he came to himself again, he shared his vision with his friend and court painter, An Gyeon, who immediately set about capturing the revelation. In three frenzied days, he completed the painting, *Dream Utopia* (*Mongyudowon-do*, 몽유도원도, 夢遊桃源圖, 1447; see Figure 10.1). It was acclaimed immediately as his masterpiece and is now recognized as one of

¹ King Sejong the Great reigned between 1418 and 1450, during which time the Korean alphabet was invented (1443) by his team of scholars at the Royal Institute of Scholars, or Hall of Worthies (Jiphyeonjeon, 집현전).

² For a description of the dream see KTV 만물상 안건의 몽유도원도 (夢遊桃源圖), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bFG-_0k1g8Y



Figure 10.1 *Mongyudowon-do* (몽유도원도, *Dream Utopia*, 1447) by Ahn Gyeon

the greatest classical Korean paintings. It is currently kept at Tenri University Museum in Japan.

Mongyudowon-do is a landscape in ink in three sections. The left-hand third depicts the real world, with ordinary sized mountains, and the perspective is taken from the front and on the level. The mid-section portrays the threshold world, where the mountains turn craggier and more majestic, and a deep crevice and a waterfall lie at the centre. The viewpoint from here onwards is taken from above the horizon line. The right-hand third of the picture captures the stunning grandeur of idealized mountains in which the peach orchard nestles, with a profusion of blossom, a modest cottage, and an empty boat. Translated literally, *Mongyudowon-do* is ‘dream journey to the immortal peach orchard’, but the meaning is closer to ‘dream utopia’.

Anpyeong’s dream, as represented by An Gyeon, had remarkable influence in Korea, both at the time and over time. The dream crossed over to the external world first by begetting a timeless classic in the painting. Then the vision spread as a public embodiment of a profound truth, inspiring no fewer than twenty-one poems on the relationships between history, imagination, and cosmic order. Since then *Dream Utopia* has stood as an emblem of unity and peace and continues to proliferate in the Korean cultural imagination, generating such transmedial artefacts in recent years as a twenty-episode historical drama series (2018), a ballet (2014), and an art installation (2016).³

Why should a dream of one individual in the fifteenth century have such a hold over the Korean cultural imagination across history? This question bears thinking about. In what follows, this chapter takes the historic example of Anpyeong’s dream, not as a Far Eastern curiosity, but as an interpretive frame through which light can be shed on more general questions about dreams—because unpacking the historical reception of *Dream Utopia* destabilizes a great deal of what is assumed about dreams in modern thinking.

³ The TV drama series *Crown Prince* was broadcast on Chosun TV between 3 March and 6 May 2018. Details of the ballet version are given in: <https://www.koreanculture.org/performing-arts/2014/7/13/korean-ballet-theatre-presents-mongyudowondo>. For the art installation see: <http://www.mongyudowondo.com/>

The first thing to note about Anpyeong's dream is that its narrative structure is basic—a revelation after a period of prolonged mental distress. As psychoanalyst Anthony Storr (1996: 175) has noted, '(t)he sequence of a period of distress followed by illumination is a characteristic human pattern.' To the modern mind shaped by psychoanalytic tropes, Anpyeong's dream would be interpreted either as his unconscious mind attempting to restore a lost unity or as personal wish fulfilment. And had the dream been interpreted as a mind working out its inner psychic tension, it would have remained an entirely private affair. But to the courtiers of King Sejong the peach orchard was not a rebus, à la Freud, whose hidden truths must be decoded in acts of private exegesis. It was publicly legible as a revelation of a greater reality that is beyond the commonplace. Hence the impact derived from a belief system that was already deeply rooted, such as the belief that dreams have social meaning.

The mutual causal interaction between dreams and society—what Adam J. Powell in Chapter 3 delineates as 'sociocultural feedback loops'—is a topic to which ethnographers have traditionally paid much attention. Representative of these is Roger Ivar Lohmann, who argues in 'Dreams and Ethnography' (2007) that dreams are 'system sensitive'. That is to say, the form they take and how they are interpreted are shaped by a pre-existing system of meanings that constitute social reality and shape the experiences of individuals. He charts in detail how dreams are an integral part of a mesh of everyday activities, assumptions, and local beliefs from which they emerge and into which they are released. Predictably, he finds wide cultural variance. But he notes one transcultural feature of human dreaming, and this feature is worth noticing precisely because of its demise in the West. Lohmann (2007: 35) writes: 'Insofar as humans are social animals, dreams do not occur in isolated minds.'

Today we are used to thinking of dreams as a private experience, but it is instructive to remember that dreams used to have a social function. 'In most cultures the role of dreams has been spiritual or visionary', Richard Walsh has argued in 'Dreaming and Narration' (2013). Dreams used to be grounded at the centre of political, religious, and social communities, providing religious visitations, presaging the fates of nations, and prophesying the birth of mythic leaders.

One of the functions that *Dream Utopia* served was to create an outlet for a free and harmonious vision of life that could not find expression in the court of Sejong. It offered a prototype of what it is to live well, creating a collective space that united all those who were capable of discerning the contours of a different world. That dreaming is a social practice is attested by the wave of utopian literature it triggered, which turned the private subjective experience of one man into a powerful public imaginary. Anpyeong's dream created an oneirocommunity, and its social validation in turn created *Dream Utopia* as it is perceived today.

10.2 Sleep science and modern oneirology

Dreams no longer draw on the tacit consensus of an oneirocommunity. With the birth of modernity, dreams lost their social function and have largely ceased to be

a social practice. Not grounded any longer by traditional social duties, dreaming is locked into its own individual space. The culmination of the individual model of dreams is today's sleep science.

The modern landscape of dreaming is, broadly speaking, subsumed under the general rubric of sleep science. Here dreams are defined as an altered state of consciousness that both humans and animals are capable of experiencing while they sleep. A representative definition of the role of sleep is given by Brendon O. Watson and Gyorgy Buzsaki, who write:

Sleep is a general tool used by mammals to tune their entire neural system to be able to properly acquire, select, and store information. If experience is gained during waking, then the connections formed by the registration of that experience are not passively sheltered by sleep, but are amplified, reorganized and generalized (by consolidation); additionally, the slate is wiped mostly clean and many synapses reset for the next day of learning (by synaptic downscaling).

(Watson and Buzsaki 2015: 78)

As this section indicates, neuroscience is supremely interested in discovering what sleep does for the brain, not in deciphering the message that sleep may induce. And it is widely agreed that sleep has two roles—memory consolidation and synaptic optimization. As Watson and Buzsaki (2015: 67) state: 'sleep performs a combination of consolidation and homeostasis that promotes optimal knowledge retention as well as optimal brain function.'

Neuroscience links two different functions of sleep to two *kinds* of sleep. In a division of labour, REM sleep loosens connections between overactive synapses in a kind of maintenance reset, while non-REM sleep consolidates memories across different structures of the brain in sharp-wave ripple waves. Both synaptic reorganization and the consolidation of memory are understood as optimizing knowledge retention in the brain. REM dreams are characterized by complex emotional and narrative structure and non-REM dreams are noted for their less visual and affective quality. Both are seen as by-products of neural optimization, an epiphenomenon of the two kinds of sleep, and not inherently meaningful in themselves.

Modern sleep science is widely regarded as an epistemic advance. But if the model of dreaming is reduced to an epiphenomenon of neural tidying up and hunkering down, it gives one pause, because it presumes that dreams happen in individual brains and only in individual brains. This belief is justified on rational grounds. Yet there is an immense drawback to this, because the very distance from other social practices that makes dreams objectively knowable, simultaneously prevents that knowledge from having a social effect. Removed from dreams are the collective powers that gave traditional dreaming its pre-eminence in pre-modern culture.

Sleep scientists do, of course, recognize that the subjective experience of dreams cannot be denied completely, not least because it affects waking state reality

(Nielson 1991). For example, Rubin Naiman (2017) laments the polarization between materialist sleep scientists and what he calls the ‘idealists’ in his paper ‘Dreamless: The Silent Epidemic of REM Sleep Loss’. Expressing ‘scientific concern’ about the link between REM/dream deprivation and immune function, memory consolidation, and mood regulation, he argues that ‘Dreams are being overly medicated, lucidly manipulated and technologically hacked in the service of wake-centric purposes’ (Naiman 2017: 83).

Naiman seeks to reclaim the power of dreams in their own right. But in keeping with the parameters of scientific rules, the attempt to salvage the content of dreams from complete irrelevance is approached almost exclusively from the viewpoint of their use-value. Thus, the answer to the problem he poses is found by worrying over the detrimental health implications of dream deprivation. Striking a hard-headed utilitarian note, he argues that we need to dream for the proper functioning of our immune system, for personal growth, and to help ‘creative and artistic endeavors’. And to restore the vital powers of dreaming, Naiman recommends the use of oneirogens (melatonin and nootropics), optimizing sleep by using blue light blocker technology, and managing medication appropriately (Naiman 2017: 82–83). In seeking to give the slip to the dead hand of utility by giving proper space to dreams, Naiman merely ends up reproducing it.

I cite this not to single out this study for criticism, but because this single focus on the instrumental value of dreams is widespread among sleep scientists. Hence research evolves around such questions as ‘*What are sleep and dreams for?*’ and ‘*What do they do?*’ The focus has shifted from the traditional *truth*-value of dreams to their functional *use*-value. The utility of dreams has taken over where once vision and divination held sway. But unhooked from any human meaning or purpose, the vast almost sacred potency associated with social dreaming is unlikely to be restored on such instrumental terms.

The single focus on instrumental value that defines sleep science does not come about because that is the defining aim of scientific method. It is not. Rather, the experimental method is funnelled to twenty-first-century scientific *culture*, where the purpose of investigation is tied to optimizing. The focus on optimizing mechanisms of synaptic reorganization coalesces with the liberal market economies of optimization, with the individual agent as the key player—which is to make the point that the framework of dreams produced by sleep science is also reflective of a time and place. It is as system-sensitive as *Dream Utopia*.

The interconnection between the two is exemplified in the two major contemporary uses of the term ‘dream’. To say ‘I have a dream’ in the waking state is to say ‘I have a blueprint for goal-oriented action for the purpose of peak self-fulfilment.’ And few statements capture this formulation of dreaming better than that made famous by the great American dreamer, Walt Disney, who asserted, ‘All our dreams can come true, if we have the courage to pursue them.’ Disneyland, the notional place ‘where dreams come true’, encapsulates ideas of self-belief, self-actualization, and tangible achievement in the real world brought about by individual will and desire.

Both uses of the term ‘dream’ are embodied by the field of sleep engineering. Prototypical of the field is the clever targeted dream incubation device called Dormio. The Dormio lab at Massachusetts Institute of Technology describe the new frontier they are charting thus:

we modernize the steel ball technique using a custom sleep onset tracker and auditory feedback which we together call Dormio. With the Dormio system, we are able to reliably influence hypnagogic dreams and collect dream content. We found that active use of the ‘targeted dream incubation’ protocol during hypnagogia can augment human creativity. This Dormio system enables future research into sleep, an underutilized and understudied state of mind vital for memory, learning, and creativity.

(Dormio website n.d.)

In a similar spirit, new sets of tools and techniques for lucid dreams and dream enactment, essence olfactory devices for dream manipulation, and haptic manipulation devices for dreams have emerged in the last twenty years. All of them target dreams for their use-value, aiming to work out a way of producing better waking states.

In turning its back on social dreaming, modern sleep science whittles the content of dreams down to pure process but the more it empties itself of content, the more it highlights dreams as being in service of the world of utility and the instrumentalized life.

10.3 The dehierarchization of perception

Optimization undermines the possibility of an oneirocommunity. But the space of traditional dreaming, which sleep science excludes, has a way of finding its way back into the cultural consciousness. In the US, some notable recurrence of the equivalent of the peach orchard is found in what might be called the ‘American Nirvana’—the Californian New Age movement. Spearheaded by the Esalen Institute in Big Sur in the 1960s and 1970s, New Ageism was heavily influenced by Eastern philosophies and indigenous practices.⁴ It is here that the possibility of social dreaming returns.

To discuss the reciprocal mediations between dream and reality that Esalen represents, we first need to return to the peach orchard and the question of *why* Anpyeong’s dream was so impactful. The first point to be made about Anpyeong’s dream here is that it does not offer obvious ‘optimization’—not for Anpyeong; not for the sharers of his dream over time and across cultures. In fact, the dream proved to be the ultimate de-optimizer. Six years after he prefigured a future in which people exist in perfect harmony with nature, Anpyeong was executed on the order

⁴ The name Esalen derives from the Esselen people who historically inhabited the Big Sur region.

of his older brother, Prince Suyang, who was greatly threatened by the ripples of unrest it created. The scholar prince who dreamed of immortal peaches was just 35 years old.

What then is the point of dreams like this? Their value obviously does not consist in being useful in real life. Rather the value consists in the fact that Anpyeong was awakened to a greater reality *in* his dream. It was only in his dream that Anpyeong encountered what he really desired. As soon as we take this into account, the hierarchy of presumption that automatically places reality *above* dreaming radically shifts. For Anpyeong, the everyday reality of factional plotting was thrown into relief by the ethereal light of unity in the peach orchard. And this altered the whole shape of his reality. The intensity and clarity of the dream rendered his life in the external world an insignificant illusion. This is the value of *Dream Utopia*—its power to displace the ‘real’ into a dream.

The welcome annulment of the difference between dream states and waking reality is hard to understand if the historical circumstances that give rise to social dreaming are not taken into account. The origin of the immortal peach orchard goes back to a Chinese fable by Tao Yuanming (陶淵明, 365–427), *The Peach Blossom Spring* (桃花源記, *Táohuā Yuán Jì*, 421). This is a story of a chance discovery of an ethereal utopia where the people lead an ideal existence in complete harmony with nature, undisturbed by the outside world for centuries.⁵ This myth was produced during the Wei and Jin period (265–420), part of the Northern and Southern Dynasties period in China (220–589), when political unrest was extreme. For those who wanted to flee from the troubles of the real world, *The Peach Blossom Spring* provided a mental refuge. Receptivity to ideas of the peach orchard was in direct ratio to exposure to the world of conflict and suffering.

This dimension is exemplified by the peculiar aspect of this utopia, without an explanation of which the Western observer may remain puzzled. In *Dream Utopia*, there is a total absence of people. What kind of utopia has no one in it, one might justifiably ask. It is certainly very different from European conceptions of utopia, such as Thomas More’s vision of ideal government on an island.⁶

To understand a vision of a paradise that exists independently of humans, one must first understand the non-humancentric Far East Asian cultural tradition where complete assimilation into nature represents an ideal. It is a vision of humans finding a place within the organic structure of nature, not humans conquering nature for maximum appropriation and extractivism. The idea of dissolving into nature, being one with it, is a way of rejecting the values of the rapacious secular world and finding freedom from the anxiety and distress of human society.

⁵ Tao Yuanming, known for ‘Tao Hua Yuan Ji’ (‘The Record of Peach Blossom Spring: 桃花源記, 421), was a Chinese poet of the Eastern Jin Dynasty (317–420). He is generally regarded as the greatest poet of the Six Dynasties period (c.220–589). He leads the ‘recluse’ poets, who wrote their greatest works in seclusion or who wrote about solitude.

⁶ See <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20160920-how-utopia-shaped-the-world>

This is where the common ground between Anpyeong and Californian New Age thinkers is made concrete. They share the belief that reality is a nightmare from which we are trying to awaken.

10.4 Nothing is everything

The Esalen commune had a genuine desire to break with twentieth-century mainstream culture and pioneer a new structure of social life. Like the ethereal paradise of the peach orchard, Esalen is situated in a naturally unspoiled and geographically spectacular landscape, up in the majestic mountains of the central Californian coast. Founded in 1962 by two Stanford psychology graduates, Michael Murphy and Richard Price, it is completely secluded from the rest of the world, accessible only through a narrow, winding road.

Murphy and Price were deeply inspired by Aldous Huxley, who explored the changing potential of human consciousness. In *The Doors of Perception* (1954), Huxley had chronicled how his perception of reality shifted under the influence of the hallucinogen mescaline. The penetrating insight into the illusory nature of everyday reality that the drug afforded opened Huxley's 'door of perception', providing him with a kind of knowledge of the world that divined the essence of reality. Subsequent experiments with altered states of consciousness became galvanized to an intense point at Esalen, forming the essential structure of what we have come to call the New Age movement. While the instrumentalization of humans was intensifying in the outside world, Esalen quickly became the epicentre of exploring altered states. Among those who were drawn to Esalen included the psychologist Abraham Maslow and the neuroscientist Francis Crick.

The Esalen culture cohered around the notion that altered states of consciousness—such as dreaming—articulate the truth of existence. Opening the doors of everyday perception was seen as a threshold ritual, providing a privileged and mystical access to the 'true world' beyond mundane reality. Thus the idea that the mind creates a reality that we can step out of became a governing principle of New Ageism. S. Suzuki's *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* (1970) popularized Zen philosophy, and taught that 'All self-centered thoughts limit our vast mind'. Suzuki viewed our everyday reality as essentially distorted by the self's constant anxieties, desires, cravings, and aversions. The illusory patina of projection, wish-fulfilment, and gross egocentric biases that we create in our wakeful state can be shed when we open the door of our perception to an underlying reality, such as symbolized by the peach orchard, and encounter a world that is independent of the ego. The American Buddhist nun Pema Chödrön, in *Start Where You Are* (1994), tells us 'Life is a dream. Death is also a dream ... waking is a dream and sleeping is a dream.' In Ojai, California, there emerged a growth of new world religions, including Annie Besant's Theosophy and the teachings of Jiddu Krishnamurti, who enjoins us to 'Wake up. Get out of your mind. Be present.' The parable of Zhuang-Zhi's

butterfly—that ‘someday there will be a great awakening when we know that this is all a great dream’—set the keynote for much New Age thought.

Two novels, both published in 1998, capture Esalen and the New Age culture around it: Michel Houellebecq’s *Atomised* and Edward St Aubyn’s *On the Edge*. *Atomised* depicts the ramifications of atomized individualism by contrasting the parallel story of two half-brothers, Bruno and Michel, whose lives are a nightmare, having been more or less abandoned by their libertine hippy parents, who prioritize their self-fulfilment over familial attachments. The dense web of connections that keep people fully alive has all been severed in this instrumentalized, alienated world. In this Houellebecqian world, all the conditions that make human relationships possible have been demolished. People live in complete disharmony with nature and with each other. The world view of the characters in this novel is succinctly represented in this passage:

Some people live to be 70, sometimes 80 years old believing that there is always something new just around the corner, as they say; in the end they practically have to be killed or at least reduced to a state of serious incapacity to get them to see reason.

In this nightmarish world, the only cure to life is non-being. Thus, like Anpyeong, Bruno finds elation in not being part of this world, leaving behind the ‘monstrous egoism, cruelty and anger’ of humans.

All around human beings were living, breathing, striving for pleasure or trying to develop their personal potential. On every floor, human beings were improving, or trying to improve, their social, sexual or professional skills or find their place within the cosmos. They were ‘bettering themselves’, in the expression commonly used in Lieu. Bruno was beginning to feel a little tired. He had stopped wishing, he had stopped wanting, he was nowhere. Slowly, by degrees his spirit soared to a state of nothingness, the sheer joy that comes from not being part of this world. For the first time since he was 13, Bruno was happy.

(Houellebecq 1998: 154)

It is only when Bruno is released from ‘wishing’ and ‘wanting’ everything that he is able to experience the bliss of nothingness.

Like *Atomised*, Edward St Aubyn’s *On the Edge* is set in a hyper-individual world, where each character strains to reach their ‘personal potential’ in competition with each other. The protagonist, Peter Thorpe, is a London investment banker who, like all the other people in his life, has ‘always been too busy to daydream, except about unexpected sex and unexpected promotion’ (St Aubyn 1998: 46). But this hyper-instrumentalized life is upended one day after a brief amorous encounter on a work trip to Germany. Peter suddenly finds that ‘(n)ow everything was in doubt’ (St Aubyn 1998: 45). At the core of Peter’s upheaval is this seed of realization: ‘Without knowing what it would mean to look on the world nakedly, he knew that he had never done so. The cataracts of habit and conditioning clouded his eyes’ (St

Aubyn 1998: 46). Compelled by Sabine, his obsession for whom now dominates his life, Peter relinquishes the life of English respectability and follows her to Big Sur to seek enlightenment in American Nirvana. But Peter finds scant possibility of sustained harmony between people as he journeys through a mixture of Eastern religions and Californian lifestyles. As was the case in *Atomised*, *On the Edge* is set in a technologically advanced, materialist society which has given free rein to atomized individualism and grotesque egotism—including in the large cast of characters gathered at Esalen for ‘human potential’ workshops. The Californian New Agers dream of an underlying unified reality into which they can collectively ‘awaken’ but the grip of individual optimization as the highest personal achievement prevents them from experiencing what made dreams attractive for them in the first place—their interconnection with each other and nature.

At the end of the novel, Peter finds a transient moment of peace in the experience of radical interconnectedness that is reminiscent of Bruno’s state of nothingness. As he grapples with questions about the nature of reality,

Peter lay on the bed, completely still, listening to the whispering sea. ... He saw all the causes from the unknowable edges of time which, for all he knew, had no edges, converging on his body in that moment to make it no other than it was. And then he saw that his body was itself a cause dispersing its effects into the future. He saw time rippling in and, caught in the revolution of a moment, rippling out again. History and all possible futures were just the interference patterns of those converging and diverging waves of causality. And then he saw that what rippled in and what rippled out were the same thing, because his body was no more focal than any other point and this moment was no more focal than any other moment.

(St Aubyn 1998: 277–278)

Peter’s undoing of self, Bruno’s state of nothingness, and Anpyeong’s peach orchard have one thing in common—which is best captured in the Buddhist concept of *sunyata*. It means, simply, that nothing is everything. Universally shared by different forms of Buddhism, it is the idea that the sensible reality of the world is but a dream of dissimilitude. To awaken to the great void from which everything has arisen—to the nothing (*sunyata*) of the suchness (*tathata*) of everything—means that dreams are not the opposite of reality but rather the highest form of reality.

Why is the idea that our sensible reality is nothing but a dream so compelling to so many people across time and place? We might turn to Bruno, Peter, and Anpyeong for a clue. One reason may possibly be because only then can they break away from the yoke of a painful life. By casting life as a nightmare from which we can awaken, *sunyata* offers a viable alternative. What makes receptivity to *sunyata* possible is the experience of extreme suffering. Suffering and *sunyata* go hand in hand. Of course, not everyone who aspires to a state of nothingness will think exactly like these characters in fiction. But there is little doubt that the concept of *sunyata* diminishes

the sense of isolation for those who might otherwise feel disconnected and dehumanized, and that this is as true today as it was when it emerged in early Buddhist thought.

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